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exhibition review of

Zola, historien et poète de la modernité

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"Zola, historien et poète de la modernité"
Grande Galerie, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris
18 October 2002–19 January 2003

Michèle Sacquin

Zola, historien et poète de la modernité

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To celebrate the centenary of Emile Zola's death, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France dedicated a beautiful exhibition to the nineteenth-century French writer (1840–1902). A smaller pedagogical display focused on the novel epitomizing modernity, "Au Bonheur des Dames," and complemented this main exhibition in the Grande Galerie. Other events included a conference entitled "*Lire, dé-lire Zola*" (to read and un-read Zola), which was held at the Bibliothèque Nationale on 24–26 October 2002. For our purposes, I will focus here on the exhibition and the catalogue, curated and organized by Michèle Sacquin, chief curator of the Manuscripts Department at the Bibliothèque Nationale.

"Zola: Historian and Poet of Modernity" included over 400 items: manuscripts, preparatory notes, photographs, paintings, letters, engravings, drawings, caricatures, and posters. The objective was to present a multi-faceted Zola, and thus to render fully his rich and diverse experiences as a man, a writer, an artist *engagé*, and as a friend and defender of the impressionists. In terms of structure and organization, Sacquin cleverly combined biographical and historical approaches on the one hand, and thematic and aesthetic approaches on the other. Consequently, the visitor could step into Zola's cultural milieu, and gain an awareness of the factors shaping his eye. Sacquin paid close attention to Zola's positivist formation, romantic heritage, and his project of a new "human comedy" with the writing of the saga *Rougon-Macquart*. Sacquin also explored Zola's political engagements and the prevalence of the arts in his life and literary production, as a result of his strong ties to such artists as Manet, Cézanne, Delacroix, and Courbet.

In the exhibition, whose content and format is mirrored in the catalogue, the visitor set out for a three-stage journey through the writer's life and work: "*écrire, décrire, dire*" (to write, to describe, to tell). This simple but efficient organizational approach offered an enriching experience, as each section, rather than limiting itself to one aspect, provided biographical, thematic, historical, and aesthetic elements. Thus, a pluralistic vision prevailed at all times. Further, the installation of the exhibition reinforced the impression of seeing all the facets at once. Indeed, as the visitor entered the gallery, he or she had an impressive panoramic view of the different parts that comprised Zola's world. Only when the visitor arrived at the

post Dreyfus Affair section, devoted to Zola's last years, was there the feeling of a page being turned, as one literally had to shift direction to see the rest of the display.

The opening section was dedicated to Zola's childhood and adolescence. The son of an Italian engineer, Zola grew up in Aix-en-Provence. Sacquin here unveiled three key factors in the writer's early life: the influence of his father, the Provence countryside, and his friendship with Cézanne. Through letters, photographs, and family portraits, Sacquin reveals the strong presence of François Zola in Emile's life, although he died when Zola was only seven. Similarly, parallels are made between Aix's landscape and the topography of Zola's fictional Plassans, the home town for his Rougon-Macquart family. The close ties to Cézanne are illustrated with correspondence between the two friends and one of Cézanne's early paintings, *L'été* (1860–62), which Zola alluded to in several of his letters.

To Write: The Time of Learning

The next section dealt with Zola's early career between 1858 and 1871. The provincial youth, now in Paris, experienced years of struggle and poverty following the coup of 1851, which gave birth to the Second Empire. Money, lust, and land speculation reigned in the French capital. Items presented in the exhibition such as the watercolor *Le Bal Mabille* by Jules de Goncourt gave a taste of this "strange epoch of folly and shamefulness." Both the exhibition and the catalogue provide numerous and specific connections between Zola's writings and the historical period. In the catalogue, each section ends with critical essays by distinguished Zola scholars, which guides us through this multi-dimensional expedition.

In his first novel, *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), Zola moved from romanticism to realism. This is demonstrated in a series of letters reviewing the novel, as well as a striking poster for the book. Sacquin also discovered interesting connections between his writing and impressionist painting. For instance, she maintains that Zola blended elements of Paul Cézanne's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* with those of Édouard Manet's earlier painting of the same title, to create Claude Lantier, the protagonist in his masterpiece, *L'oeuvre* (1886).

Siding with the Moderns in literature (that is, the followers of Balzac) and in art (particularly Manet and the *plein-air* painters), Zola was one of their first defenders. Zola brought together artists in his home and regularly met in the Café Guerbois with a number of them, including Manet, Edgar Degas, Pierre August Renoir, Frédéric Bazille, and Edmond Duranty. They were the "Bohèmes," as opposed to the "Bourgeois"; in the exhibition, Jean-François Raffaelli's *Bohèmes au café* (1886) perfectly captured these meetings. Facing that work were two paintings, Bazille's *L'Atelier de Bazille rue de la Condamine* (1870) and Fantin-Latour's *Un atelier aux Batignolles* (1870), which demonstrated that these modern writers and painters constituted a united group. In *L'oeuvre*, the novel about a painter who strives to produce a masterpiece, Zola described this close fraternity.

To Describe: The Time of Analysis

The next part of the exhibition covered the years from 1871 to 1897, during which time Zola wrote his monumental series *Les Rougon-Macquart: histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le second empire* (consisting of twenty novels) and *Les trois villes (Lourdes, Rome, Paris)*. For this period, Zola's "atelier d'écriture" and his "Mythography of the Real" are evoked. Surprising frictions between Zola and the young secular republic are revealed, as official censorship

delayed the publication of several of his novels. On display are caricatures and articles demonstrating that, despite Zola's lifelong status as a journalist, his work was virulently attacked. The republic marks the beginning of a new era, and several paintings in the exhibition illustrate themes that shaped Zola's literary imagination, such as the machine, with Maurice Delondre's *Dans l'omnibus* (1885), and the working class, with Alfred Dehodencq's *La Descente des ouvriers*.

Zola by now had formed a small group of writers that included Alphonse Daudet, Gustave Flaubert, the Goncourt brothers, and Turgenev. Their relationships greatly influenced his work, but they evolved and sometimes became poisoned. Zola kept his friendships with numerous painters and also gathered together such promising young writers as Guy de Maupassant, Joris Karl Huysmans, and Octave Mirbeau in Médan. In the 1880s, family photographs show a tired, heavier, and aging Zola. The writer had married Gabrielle Alexandrine Meley in 1870, but she bore him no children. In 1888, he began a secret liaison with a younger woman, Jeanne Rozerot. Zola's letters to her suggest a profound attachment and she ultimately gave him the children he had longed for.

In her catalogue essay "Writing *The Rougon-Macquart*: Work and Imagination," Sacquin provides a wealth of preparatory notes, manuscripts, and drawings to show how Zola brought this monumental literary masterpiece into being. Every aspect of the narrative—from the imaginary topography of Plassans, to sketches of the house at la Goutte-d'Or, to the map of the Parisian *Halles*—is meticulously described in writing or in drawings to create a visceral realism.

Yet, and fortunately for the reader, Zola combined this rigorous method with literary imagination. Sacquin treated this aspect of the writer's approach in the exhibition and catalogue by examining of Zola's creation of myths. Here, in a manner similar to reading Zola's novels, the visitor-reader, freed from the blinders of naturalism, is transported to another realm, which discloses a lesser-known Zola. (This "mythological" aspect of the writer's work has recently been described as a "jump to the stars"; see Colette Becker, *Zola. Le saut dans les étoiles*, Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2002). Zola's myths involve the city of Paris, the cycle of life and death, women, machines, and insanity. The exhibition section on Zola's Paris, for example, included items that ranged from panoramic views of housing (rich and poor) and symbols of modernity (Les Halles, department stores) to paintings of the stock exchange and urban machinery (bridges, train stations). Paintings on view that complemented Zola's imagination included Camille Pissaro's *Les Boulevards extérieurs* (1879), Gustave Caillebotte's *Le Pont de l'Europe* (1876–77), Edgar Degas's *A la Bourse* (1878–79), and Claude Monet's *La Gare d'Argenteuil* (1872).

In the next section of the exhibition, women who influenced Zola's life were successively displayed on a TV screen, parallel to their fictional counterparts. Zola represented all sorts of women in his Rougon-Macquart series. These character types include the prostitute (Nana), the pure young girl (Angélique), the poor working woman (Gervaise), the peasant (Françoise), and the buxom shopkeeper (Lisa). Sacquin allows us to penetrate the writer's literary imagination through comparisons with Jean François Millet's *Tête de paysanne* (1872), Odilon Redon's *Profil de lumière* (1886), Renoir's *Femme à la lettre* and Gustave Moreau's *Le Sphinx deviné* (1878).

Here Sacquin sheds some new light on aspects of Zola's vision. Indeed, Zola went far beyond naturalism in his integration of Greek mythology. As Henri Mitterand writes in the introduction of the catalogue, Zola had a profound understanding of the culture of his time, of its "appetites," its "needs," and its "energies." In this way, he escaped being a mere writer of naturalism, or a slavish follower of Balzac. Many Zola critics would argue that it is precisely when Zola takes on the mantle of the Greek poets and digresses from his own naturalist doctrine (presented in his *Roman Expérimental*) that his true artistic genius emerged.

Both the catalogue and the exhibition benefited from the contributions of the most renowned scholars of French literature, art, history, and art history, including Henri Mitterand, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Denis Bredin, Jean Lacouture, and Laurent Joffrin. In the exhibition, their multiple perspectives were available to the museum-goer through videotapes. This refreshing use of modern museography acknowledges the evolving views on Zola's work and their impact on our perceptions of him as a writer and cultural icon. Another helpful feature of this centenary project is a virtual version of the exhibition, which is accessible at the following Website address: <http://expositions.bnf.fr/Zola/index.htm> This site provides numerous pedagogical leads for teachers and researchers.

To Tell: The Time of Utopia

The publication of *Les Trois Villes* and the *Rougon-Macquart* saga brought Zola international recognition, and in the last phase of his career, a new artist seems to emerge, energized by his relationship with Jeanne and the birth of his children. The year 1898 was a turning point. On 13 January, "J'accuse" was published in the Parisian journal *L'Aurore*. In this open letter, addressed to the French president, Zola vigorously defended Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish soldier wrongly accused and condemned to prison. Sacquin insightfully rendered this "shout in the street" in the exhibition. Numerous letters and Henry De Groux's painting, *Zola à la sortie du prétoire*, expressed the intensity and the violence of the "explosion" that followed Zola's act. Supported by many (for example, Pissaro and Monet), Zola was also attacked and briefly forced into exile. The Dreyfus Affair shook the country, and the popular media exploited the story. Sacquin demonstrated the interest of the masses with Felix Vallotton's "L'âge du papier," published in *Le cri de Paris*, just ten days after the appearance of "J'accuse" (presented in the catalogue only), and a lithograph entitled "Jeu de l'Oie de l'affaire Dreyfus," which parodies a common parlor game. Sacquin staged the Dreyfus Affair in the middle of the exhibition, but without making it the focal point. Even so, it is clear that this event was a catalyst for Zola, both as a man and as a writer entering the twentieth century.

After the Dreyfus Affair, Zola wanted to tell everything and tell it loud: his literary hatreds, his aesthetic convictions, and his faith in words. He wrote *Les Evangiles*—secular gospels consisting of three volumes: *Fécondité*, *Travail*, and *Vérité*—and an opera, for which Alfred Bruneau composed the music. In this futuristic, fin-de-siècle socialist vision, Zola advanced his belief that the coming century would end misery and violence, thanks to democracy and progress. *Fécondité*, which was highly praised by Sigmund Freud, celebrated human life at a time when France suffered from a low birthrate in comparison to other European countries. In this work, Zola concentrated his attacks against the bourgeois tenets of Malthusianism. Tournon's poster (1899) for the novel in *L'Aurore* fully renders Zola's hymn to life. The second volume, *Travail* (1901), is a fascinating novel of anticipation, inspired by the social movements and industrial developments of the day. The exhibition included letters,

preparatory notes, and documents demonstrating the influence of Zola on other art forms, such as the sketch of an industrial city by the architect Tony Garnier (1901–04). The third part of this trilogy, *Vérité*, was inspired by the Dreyfus Affair and published posthumously.

At the end of the exhibition and catalogue are numerous family photographs taken at Médan that attest to Zola's new passion for photography. The figures of Zola and his clan resemble Pierre Bonnard's characters in *L'Après-midi bourgeoise ou la Famille Terrasse* (1900). The beautiful setting at the end of the exhibition featuring projected lights and images suggests Zola's influence reaching across the years to the twenty-first century.

In conclusion, the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue shed new light on this author who too often is stereotyped and associated only with naturalism and the Dreyfus Affair. They intelligently mirror readings advanced by such current Zola scholars as Henri Mitterand, Colette Becker, and Alain Pagès, all of whom contributed to the project. The analyses of the relationships between Zola and the Moderns, showing how his friends and his role as an art critic shaped his literary imagination, are especially revealing. Enlightening for the amateur and specialist alike, this beautiful homage to Zola, one of the most widely read French writers of all time, shows him to be an even more complex and richly talented artist than we had imagined.

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